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ABSTRACT

Data on the status of Samoan students reveal that they suffer severe educational deprivation in many areas. This deprivation is obscured and often exacerbated by grouping data on Pacific Islanders with that on the comparatively more successful, more numerous, culturally very different and generally more urbanized Asian American groups. While early American Samoan migrants were economically successful, economic shifts and downturns have led to the disappearance of employment opportunities, especially for the large numbers who do not possess adequate educational skills. The particular educational problems facing American Samoan communities are: (1) limited English proficiency skills; (2) the isolation of American Samoan communities from the schools their children attend, exacerbating poor communication between teachers and parents; (3) a profound cultural barrier; (4) a lack of knowledge of Pacific Island culture among local educational agencies and teachers; and (5) lack of technical curriculum support for schools and school districts with large Samoan enrollments. These problems lead to a high dropout rate from high school, a very small percentage of Samoans reaching and completing college, and a poor overall level of scholastic performance at all grade levels. (RDN)

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THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF AMERICAN SAMOAN STUDENTS

by

Patosina Luce

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The Educational Needs of American Samoan Students

Introduction

Data on the status of Samoan students reveal that they suffer severe educational deprivation in many areas. This deprivation is obscured and often exacerbated by grouping data on Pacific Islanders with that on the comparatively more successful and more numerous Asian American groups. Briefly, the particular educational problems which face American Samoan communities are as follows: language difficulties; lack of communication between teachers and parents; lack of knowledge by teachers of Pacific Island culture; and little in the way of technical curriculum support for schools and school districts with large Samoan enrollments. These problems lead, in turn, to a high dropout rate from high school, a very small percentage of Samoans reaching and completing college, and a poor overall level of scholastic performance at all grade levels.

Background

The seven islands of American Samoa, comprising a total of 76.2 square miles, straddle the latitude of 14 degrees south in the Pacific Ocean, lying approximately midway between the Hawaiian Islands and New Zealand. The main American Samoan islands of Tutuila and the Manu'a group are the easternmost islands of an archipelago which includes the islands of Savai'i and Upolu, today recognized as the independent State of Western Samoa.

The responsibility of the United States for Samoan affairs has a long history. The United States obtained permission to build a naval station at Pago Pago in 1872, accepted a treaty of friendship and commerce in 1878, and joined with Britain and Germany in exercising rights over the Samoan archipelago in 1889. In 1899 the United States assumed formal control over the eastern Samoan islands after signing the Berlin Treaty. In 1929 the United States Senate passed a joint resolution vesting all power over American Samoa in the President of the United States; this resolution remains in force today. United States historical responsibility toward Samoa was emphasized from the outset of Samoan-U.S. relations, particularly after the 1929 resolution was passed, and continues unchanged to the present. The United States accepted a trust relationship to protect American Samoan interests. Such a relationship has existed since the U.S. assumed sovereignty over Samoan lands, and in the process limited Samoan authority over such lands. A long line of historical precedents indicates the U.S. governments commitment of maintaining its trust responsibilities to American Samoans. It is clear that such responsibility extends to American Samoans living in United States, since it was U.S. policy, particularly that of the military, to relocate Samoans to Hawaii and the mainland just after World War II.

From 1899 to 1951, American Samoa was administered by the Department of the Navy. From the beginning, the U.S. Navy administered Samoa with a kind of benign neglect; permitting Samoans to go about their affairs as they wished, but also providing little in the way of health and social services. One result of this pattern of administration was a virtual disregard of the need for a good educational system for the indigenous Samoan population. In fact, until the early 1960's a high school education was not universally available to Samoan students. As a result, when the Navy left Samoa after World War II Samoans were ill-prepared for the demands of the postwar world -- most Samoans of the war-time and immediate post-war generation were unable to achieve more than a ninth grade education.

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American Samoans have been migrating to the United States since World War II. The first migrants were primarily servicemen and their families relocated by the United States military. Later migrants, often relatives of those already established on the mainland or in Hawaii, came to take advantage of the many opportunities offered by life in America. In 1980, the Census enumerated 41,948 Samoans living in the United States. Of these, the vast majority, 95%, were found to be living in California, or Hawaii (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983) Table 1 presents the Samoan population of the United States by Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas. As one can see from this table, major concentrations of Samoans can be found in the following areas: Honolulu, Los Angeles-Long Beach, San Francisco-Oakland, San Diego, Anaheim-Santa Ana-Garden Grove, Seattle and San Jose.

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Table 1

STANDARD METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREAS (SMSAs) WITH THE LARGEST SAMOAN POPULATIONS: 1980

SMSA	NUMBER	PERCENT
Total Population in U.S.	41,948	100.0
Total Population in SMSAs	40,273	96.0
Honolulu	13,811	32.9
Los Angeles-Long Beach	8,049	19.2
San Francisco-Oakland	4,239	10.1
San Diego	2,807	6.7
Anaheim-Santa Ana-Garden Grove	2,008	4.8
Seattle-Everett	1,164	2.8
San Jose	1,037	2.5

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

Because of widespread concern among Samoan communities and human service providers that the 1980 census drastically underenumerated American Samoans, a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor sought to evaluate the Census Bureau's findings. Based on known migration rates, estimations of fertility in both the islands and in the United States, and other secondary sources, this study concluded that the Census undercounted Samoans by about 20% (NWREL-DOL 1984). Thus, the actual Samoan population of the United States probably exceeded 50,000 in 1980. Based on projected migration and natural increase rates, the population will nearly triple by the year 2000. Assuming that the same proportion of individuals continue to migrate to Hawaii and California at the same rate (about 60% to California; 40% to Hawaii) then the present Samoan population of California probably numbers between 32,000 and 40,000 (NWREL-DOL 1984).

American Samoans indicate that they come to the U.S. mainland for many reasons, but the most important is to take advantage of the educational and employment opportunities available here. Despite the Department of Interior's attempts to establish a universal and centralized educational system subsequent to 1951, there continue to be problems in keeping students in school, and most Samoans admit that they believe the schools of American Samoa to be generally inferior to those found on the mainland. The primary reason for this negative evaluation is the fact that while schools in American Samoa give instruction primarily in English, students never learn this language proficiency, since the language of choice in all other contexts of life is Samoan. In addition, it has not been until recently that American Samoa has been able to adequately recruit and train Samoan teachers. Before, all instruction was done by teachers from the mainland under one to two year contracts, or by Samoans with only one or two years of college training (Avegalio 1985). Parents thus perceive that mainland schools provide an education which gives their children skills most appropriate to a social and economic future controlled by the United States (Janes 1984).

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Migration is not without its costs, however. American Samoans experience tremendous stress upon migrating to the mainland. This stress appears to arise as a consequence of adapting to a foreign social, economic, and cultural environment (Janes 1984). While early migrants were economically successful, due primarily to the availability of good and secure employment in heavy industry, economic shifts and downturns have led to the disappearance of employment opportunities. This is especially true for those who do not possess adequate educational skills; lack of education is cited universally by Samoans to be one of the major barriers to obtaining employment and economic self-sufficiency (NWREL-DOL 1984). Contributing to this problem is the ever-growing migration of other Samoans, who without jobs and housing must rely on previously settled relatives, thereby placing even more pressure on diminishing economic resources. In the 1980 U.S. Census, Samoans were found to be nearly the poorest ethnic minority in the United States, ranking just above Vietnamese refugees (Tables 2 and 3, next page).

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Table 2

Per Capita Income of Selected Groups in the United States And in Selected States, 1979

Selected Group	United States	California	Hawaii
Total (dollars)	7,298	8,295	7,740
White	7,808	9,109	8,762
Black	4,545	5,710	5,437
American Indian	4,577	6,030	6,244
Asian and Pacific Islander	7,037	7,243	7,351
Japanese	9,058	9,567	9,475
Chinese	7,476	7,946	9,422
Filipino	6,915	6,625	5,375
Korean	5,544	6,010	6,520
Asian Indian	8,667	8,159	10,165
Vietnamese	3,382	3,315	2,813
Hawaiian	5,691	7,169	5,328
Guamanian	5,533	5,747	4,249
Samoan	3,573	4,081	2,729

Source: NWREL-DOL 1984

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Table 3

Summary Poverty Measures of Samoans in the United States
And Selected States, 1979

Summary Poverty Measures	United States		California		Hawaii	
	Total	Samoans	Total	Samoans	Total	Samoans
Percent of Persons:						
Below 75% of Poverty Level:	8.3	19.6	7.5	13.8	6.1	27.8
Below Poverty Level:	12.4	29.5	11.4	21.4	9.9	40.2
Below 150% of Poverty Level:	21.7	46.9	20.7	36.1	19.0	62.5
Below 200% of Poverty Level:	31.7	62.5	30.0	53.9	29.0	75.7

Source: NWREL-DOL 1984

Educational Problems of American Samoan Youth

Samoans are a relatively young and growing population. Samoan women have high fertility rates relative to other ethnic groups. They have the second highest American fertility rates in the 15-24 age range and the highest fertility rates in the 25-44 age range. At present, Samoans are the youngest of all immigrant populations in California and Hawaii; having a median age of 19.4 and 17.9 years, respectively (NWREL-DOL 1984). At the current rate of growth, the Samoan population of the United States will double in just 23 years.

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Thus, in a short time Samoan youth will bear the responsibility for the support of their communities. Despite upward mobility by many capable and ambitious young people, the current educational and employment picture of Samoan youth does not appear to be improving to the extent necessary to reverse the grim Samoan socioeconomic picture. Indeed, most study findings suggest that most American Samoan students fare very poorly in school. Just over 60% report completing high school (including those educated in Samoa), and most studies of grade averages and academic testing report that Samoan children fare very poorly (e.g., Asian American Field Study 1973; see Table 4, following). An analysis of U.S. Census data indicates poor school performance indirectly, measuring enrollment rates by age. Using this measure, there is a substantial drop in numbers of students enrolled after age 17 in all ages. Census data also show that male Samoans age 25 and over have the lowest proportion of male high school graduates of any Asian-Pacific Islander group on the mainland, and that Samoan females over age 25 have the lowest proportion of female high school graduates Asian and Pacific Islanders in Hawai i and the second lowest, after Guamanians (Chamorros), on the mainland.

Table 4

Percent of High School and College Graduates for Samoans Aged 25 and Over in the United States and Selected States, 1980

	United States		California		Hawaii	
	Total	Samoans	Total	Samoans	Total	Samoans
Percent High School Graduates	66.5	65.7	73.5	63.5	73.8	51.0
Percent College	16.2	7.3	19.6	6.6	20.3	3.3

Source: NWREL-DOL 1984

Teachers and counselors, both Samoan and non-Samoan, and Samoan community members cite a number of factors affecting Samoan academic achievement in American schools (NWREL-DOL 1984). First, Samoans often experience problems in communicating adequately in the English language. Though many Samoans speak English adequate to day-to-day activities, the ability to utilize and comprehend the language in written and verbal forms basic to quality education is not commensurate (NWREL-DOL 1984). In a recent paper, it was noted that Samoans encounter several communication problems, including: confusion about complex verbal and written instructions; conflict in social dimensions of communication -- assumptions about social relations that differ radically between the U.S. and Samoa; and misinterpretation of non-verbal communication (Platt and

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Shore 1984). Language problems are exacerbated for children who have been raised on the mainland, for not only do they not learn adequate English, they do not interact with adults enough to develop a good grasp of formal and polite Samoan, a dialect distinct from the everyday language they do learn (Platt and Shore 1984). Thus, as one Samoan teacher has noted, "nearly all Samoan kids can be identified as having limited English proficiency (LEP) skills."

Secondly, American Samoan communities are isolated from the schools their children attend. Samoan children who migrate from American Samoa to Hawaii or the mainland must adjust to vast differences in school curricula and academic and social expectations. Even children born in the United States rarely have parents who have attended American schools. Parents are unfamiliar with attendance and grading policies, course options, and school activities. The language problems cited above serve to compound parents' insufficient knowledge of channels for communicating with school administrators and teachers.

Thirdly, the cultural barrier which Samoan students must face is profound. Many scholars have documented patterns of behavior among Samoan children which are appropriate in the home, but inappropriate in school; and, conversely, patterns of behavior learned at school that are inappropriate in their Samoan homes (Holmes 1974; Mead 1937). These differences cause conflict and confusion both at home and in school. Cultural difference also often lead educators to identify problems as behavioral rather than as problems in basic communication.

Fourth, local educational agencies and teachers are not equipped either to identify or address the needs of Samoans students. Even though performance data indicate that most Samoan students fare very poorly, they are almost never identified as having limited English proficiency skills. Local educational agencies have few, if any, instruments with which to evaluate Samoan language abilities or to assess needs adequately with reference to improving skills. The Samoan communities are poorly defined and even more poorly understood relative to local educational agencies. By and large educational officials labor under inaccurate notions of who community leaders are and how they can be appropriately approached. Educators know little about Samoan culture and, in many instances, what is know is incorrect or misinformed. This makes it difficult to evaluate realistically classroom behavior and virtually impossible to work with parents to solve problems. This type of ignorance and misunderstanding exists for the Samoans themselves. Few parents have been to American schools, so most are unaware of the policies, procedures, and expectations of American schools. Because many of these policies and expectations are in conflict with traditional Samoan cultural practices, students and schools find themselves at odds with one another. The tremendous educational needs of Samoans are thus not known and cannot be addressed.

Lastly, and contributing greatly to the failure of educational institutions to serve Samoan students effectively, is a tendency for state and federal departments of education to identify Pacific Islanders as belonging to the "Asian American" ethnic group. This matter of misidentification seriously restricts the access of Samoan students to bilingual education programs, scholarships for higher education, and vocational training. American Samoans simply tend to be overlooked, for Asian Americans are significantly more numerous, culturally distinct from Pacific Islanders, and comparatively more successful in socioeconomic and educational terms. The particular problems plaguing Samoan students are not identified, because they are often masked by data of a much different sort gathered on Asian Americans. For example, data on poverty levels, such as that presented in Table

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2, illustrate that on the whole, the Asian/Pacific Islander group fares well. However, looking at each specific subgroup presents a very different picture: Pacific Islanders are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder when compared with Asian Americans.

In a recent set of papers funded by the U.S. Department of Education (APACS), and published by the Association for Asian Pacific American Studies (1982), Alex Mamak and Sucheng Chan presented both the Pacific Islander and Asian American perspectives on the matter of identification. Both concluded that the matter of identifying Pacific Islanders as being a component of the Asian group is a serious error for several reasons. Chan commented:

> Although Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans have been grouped together under a single rubric, and although the number of Pacific Islanders in a state such as California is rapidly increasing, most Asian Americans are quite ignorant about Pacific Islanders. Most Asian Americans do not know who Pacific Islanders are and they know very little about the history and culture of Pacific Islanders. This state of ignorance is true not only of the public but also of scholars as well.
>
> The differences between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are much greater than the similarities between them. Most of the immigrants from Asia today come from highly urbanized localities within industrializing countries. Pacific Islanders, on the other hand, come from societies and economies which are not yet highly urbanized or industrialized. The adjustment Pacific Islanders must make to live in American society is therefore probably much greater than the adjustment which immigrants from Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, or Manila must make. Consequently, the nature and level of services for Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans must of necessity differ (APACS Briefing, May-June 1982, pp. 1-2).

Mamak agreed with this assessment, noting in addition that one consequence of identifying Pacific Islanders as Asians is that little or no data on Pacific Island education are ever collected. Thus, the provision of services to Pacific Islanders is hampered from the beginning by a fundamental lack of necessary background data.

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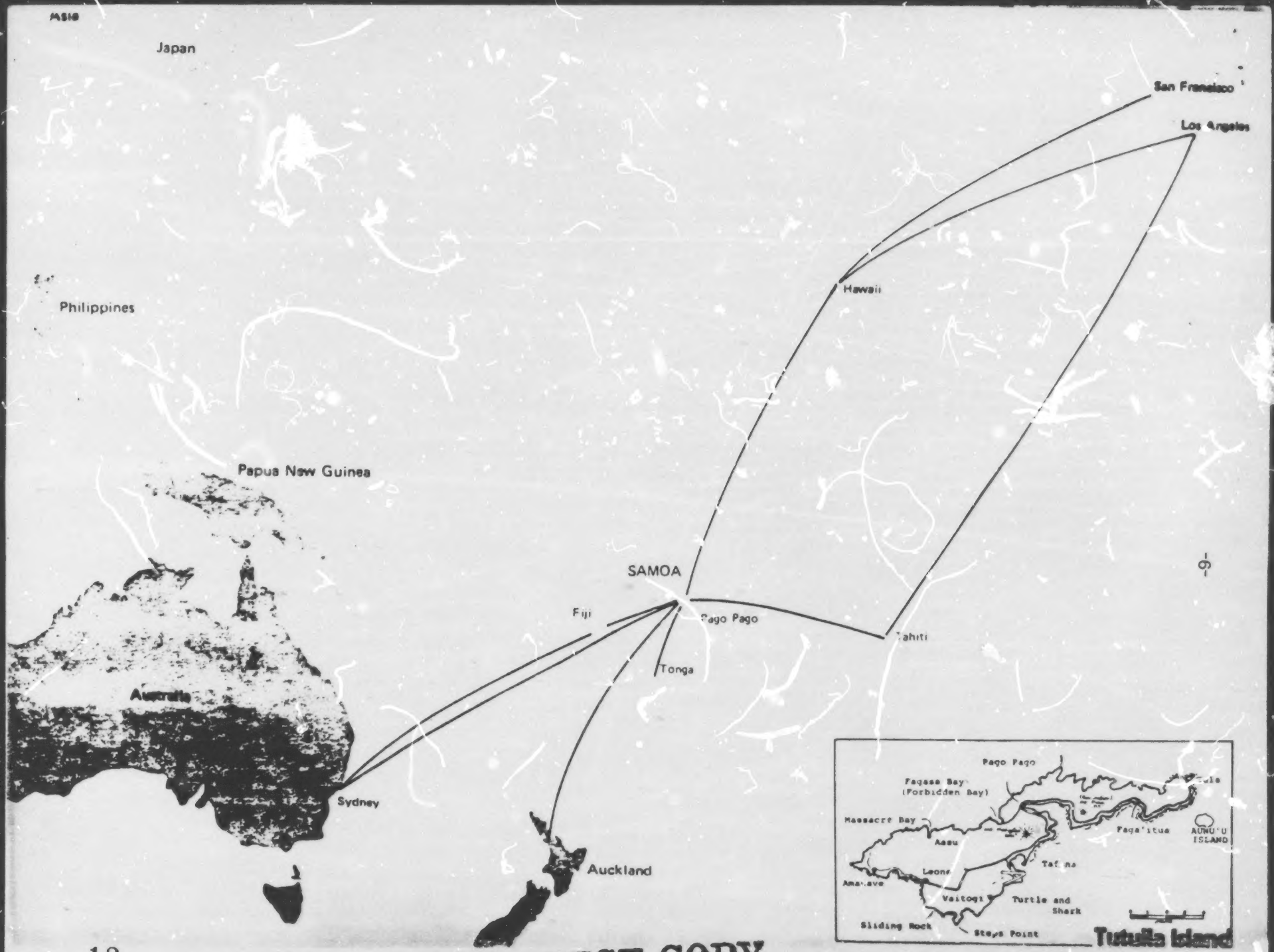

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GUIDELNES FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT DEVELOPMENT

REGARDLESS OF THE NATURE OF THE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM, CERTAIN GUIDELINES CAN AID IN ITS DEVELOPMENT:

1. PLAN ACTIVITIES THAT MAKE SENSE TO PARENTS,
2. PROVIDE PARENTS WITH THE INFORMATION THEY NEED,
3. ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THE CLASSROOM,
4. PLAN ACTIVITIES IN WHICH PARENTS CAN WORK COOPERATIVELY WITH OTHER PARENTS,
5. GIVE PARENTS ADEQUATE FEEDBACK ON THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS AND PROGRESS.

(Kaines 1979)